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1. Ronsard's SUR LA MORTE DE MARIE

All our critical and school editions print the most famous of Ronsard's sonnets on the death of Marie (published 1578) in the following manner [see verso for the textual printing and for Professor Spitzer's translation].

But it should be obvious that the incidental clause introduced by the conjunction *comme* (line 1) can not be a temporal clause ("*When* one sees the rose . . .") which would be followed by the main clause *la grâce dans sa feuille et l'amour se repose* ("then Grace and Love rest in its foliage"?), but corresponds to the *ainsi,* "in the same manner" (line 9), and has a comparative meaning: "just as." In the detailed commentary of our poem which I published in *Le francais moderne* IV (1936), pp. 37 seq., I indicated the correspondence of the comparative *ainsi* of verse 9 to *comme* of verse 1 and emphasized that the "greater part of the sonnet" consists in *one* sentence—but I did not outspokenly stress the necessity of a change in punctuation. We must then delete the period at the end of line 8 and think of the first three stanzas of the poem (the two quatrains and the first tercet) as one syntactical whole, as one sentence which comes to an end only at the moment when the death of the maiden is solemnly announced (*La Parque t'a tuée . . .*). But how are we to interpret syntactically stanza 2 with its two main clauses (*la grâce . . . se repose; mais . . . elle meurt*) which seem to interrupt the sequence "comparative clause—main clause" (*Comme on voit . . . . Ainsi en ta première et jeune nouveauté)?* Evidently as a typically Homeric parenthesis which adds epic breadth to the simile, of the type exemplified by *Iliad* XXI, 257 ff. (line for line translation by W. B. Smith and W. Miller, New York, 1944):

> Just as a peasant, wat'ring his fields, from a dark-flowing fountain leadeth the stream in a channel along by his crops and his gardens bearing a pick in his hand, and he casts from the ditch the obstructions—*pebbles in number are swept away in its course as it floweth onward swift in descent, and it gurgles anon as it glideth over a slope in its path, overtaking its leader before it:* thus did ever the wave of the stream [Scamander] catch up with Achilles, swift of foot though he was, for the gods are stronger than mortals.

To the italicized passage in the Homeric simile would then correspond

SUR LA MORTE DE MARIE

Comme on voit sur la branche, au mois de mai, la rose
En sa belle jeunesse, en sa première fleur,
Rendre le ciel jaloux de sa vive couleur,
Quand l'aube de ses pleurs au point du jour l'arrose;

La grâce dans sa feuille et l'amour se repose,
Embaumant les jardins et les arbres d'odeur:
Mais, battue ou de pluie ou d'excessive ardeur,
Languissante elle meurt feuille à feuille déclose.

Ainsi en ta première et jeune nouveauté,
Quand la terre et le ciel honoraient ta beauté,
La Parque t'a tuée, et cendre tu reposes.

Pour obsèques recois mes larmes et mes pleurs,
Ce vase plein de lait, ce panier plein de fleurs,
Afin que vif et mort ton corps ne soit que roses.

—PIERRE DE RONSARD

Just as one sees the rose on the branch in the month of May,
in its beautiful youth, in its first bloom
make the sky jealous of its lively color,
when dawn sprinkles it with its tears as the day approaches—

Grace and Love rest in its foliage,
filling gardens and trees with the balm of their scent,
but, stricken by rain or by excessive heat
the rose dies languorously, losing leaf after leaf—,

in the same manner in your first and fresh youth,
when heaven and earth were bending to your beauty:
the Fates have killed you and you rest in your urn, become ashes.

Accept as a funeral gift my tears and my weeping,
this cup full of milk, this basket full of flowers,
so that, alive or dead, your body may be nothing but roses.

—LEO SPITZER

our stanza 2 in which the consequence of the 'jealousy of the sky' (line 3) is described, the fading of the beautiful flower under the influence of rain or heat, just as in the Homeric passage the description of the pebbles swept along by the stream and of the unresistible onrush of the latter is potentially contained in the previous mention of the opening of the channel by the gardener. And just as in the Homeric simile the narrated action does not take up more than two lines while (or rather, *because*) the simile (the similar action) had been so carefully developed in six lines, so with Ronsard the actual death of the maiden is told in only three lines, after eight lines of preparation by the description of the death of the rose (and some of the expressions used of the flower are repeated, *leitmotif*-like, in the three lines of recapitulation). In both cases the *accelerando* or *raccourci* toward the end of the period is in the nature of "narration by simile." Only, while in the epic simile the ambiental area of the narrative is broadened—from the revenge wrought by the god of the river on Achilles, we are led to the peaceful world of the gardener who controls nature—in the poem of Ronsard, the maiden is compared not to a thing of nature outside of her, but to a thing of nature with which she is (or should become) ultimately consubstantial, as the tradition of Ausonius requires it ("quam longa una dies, aetas tam longa rosarum."—Ausonius). In Homer's world of warriors, nature (through the similes generally referring to nature) is brought in, in order to restore the *totality* of life which his protagonists make us forget—in the Ausonius-Ronsard tradition, human beings *are* ultimately nature and are brought to the *fullness* of their true organic being. The French lyrical poet must have used the device of the epic simile in order to make us visualize the slow gradual development of the "human flower" from fresh bloom to deadly languor, at the end of which we will hear the shrill verdict of Fate (*la Parque t'a tuée, et . . .*, a heart-rending exclamation marked by a strident hiatus), later to witness the anticipated final (and miraculous) metamorphosis of the ashes in the urn into roses, a transfiguration brought about by the sacrificial action (we are reminded of Poussin's "Shepherds in Arcadia") of the lover. He is able to wrest a miraculous reward from those same pagan gods who, if jealous of the living earthly beauty, may grant immortality in beauty to the body of the dead maiden (*afin que vif et mort ton corps ne soit que roses*).

Thus our poem falls into three parts:

1) the long epic-descriptive simile, depicting the gradual decadence of physical beauty (lines 1-10);
2) the sudden dramatic outburst (taking up only the first hemistych of line 10) at the moment of the realization by the lover that the beautiful being is dead;
3) immediately following (2nd hemistych) the calm of composure and renunciation which leads to the sacrificial action and to the transfiguration of the beautiful dead body into "nothing but beauty."

Whoever wishes to recite the poem correctly will have to save much of his breath while delivering part 1, in order to be able to give the first

part of line 10, the dramatic apex of the poem, its full emotional strength, immediately afterwards to subside into the composed calm consonant with the solemn sacrifice to Beauty and its miraculous reward: the Transfiguration of the Maiden. In order to guide recitation correctly, we should henceforth print stanza 2 between parentheses.

—Leo Spitzer, *The Johns Hopkins University*